

Making Fools Gold BY ALVAH MILTON KERR



OUTSIDE was gray night, on high stars in blue spaces and a bent moon swimming upon its back in frothy cloud, below these a thousand acres of smoking housetops, tilted, jumbled, and jagged like a lava flow, and beneath this waste, mingling intimately, the world old comedy and tragedy of life. At points, as if the lava were still irruptive, and notably from the stacks of the Planet Steel works and the Cradle Smelting plant, flames and black clots of vapor waved upward. Here and there, like ganglia, centers, were wedge shaped acres of railway tracks, beyond spotted with colored lights, while northward lay the great city.

Steam and electric roads and a boulevard came down from the greater city to the less, from the mighty Chicago to the smoky purview that helped to make the larger aggregation possible, and in a big house upon the boulevard, just inside the social dead line drawn between the city's aristocratic borders and the bedraggled skirts of the manufacturing town, reigned music, light, and dancing.

Mrs. Hopewell's social events were luxurious affairs, a trifle overperformed, a shade too gorgeous, perhaps, but indubitably entertaining. Many from the boulevard were there, a few from the region of the great mills, among the latter young Dr. Lane, a promising struggler for place and practice in South Suburb, and Ann Saxon, the hazel eyed daughter of "Gruff" Saxon, a foreman in the Planet works.

Lane had done a few things in literature which were thought creditable, yielding him, as a main result, the approving interest of Mrs. Hopewell and others of her set, who, having entered into much and recently acquired wealth, liked to ornament it with such blossoms of intellectuality as fell in their way. Besides, Lane having enjoyed the entire of the Hopewell mansion for months, had become enamored of and secretly betrothed to Mrs. Hopewell's niece, Barbara Crown, daughter of a country storekeeping brother of Mrs. Hopewell.

As for Ann Saxon, though humbly connected, she had won local fame as a violinist, some averring that her renditions were wonderful and, when viewed in the light of her opportunities, perhaps they were. She was not beautiful in the usual sense, having an almost boy like figure, with a head finely shaped, but rather large and heavily clustered about with a waving mass of coppery hair. In its frame of dead gold, the upper half of her face shone like a cameo; below that the illusion was lost; the mouth was too wide and sensitive, and the chin too square. Nevertheless, when she stood that night by the piano ready to play, her slim arms, bare, her simple white dress falling in almost straight lines about her, Lane found himself vaguely recalling a Greek statue he had seen somewhere.

At length the violin fell silent, Lane did his part in creating a small tempest of applause, and with a sigh turned to his companion. She was steadily regarding her fan. Near her stood a singularly handsome man. "Hello, Jerf!" said Lane in hearty, impulsive fashion, grasping the newcomer's hand. "Permit me to present you to Miss Barbara Crown, our hostess." Miss Crown, this is my friend, Mr. Tilford Jerf. Make merry, and please excuse me while I go and congratulate Miss Saxon. She is the pride of South Suburb, you know; sort of second and superior edition of the "Sunshine of Paradise Alley." He bowed and hastened away.

Jerf had a form and face that attracted men and fascinated women; a dark but perfect beauty of exterior that amazed one at first glance and left one musing when it was no longer visible. He was appeared so exquisitely, about him hung so fine an air of taste, that instinctively one felt that ease and beautiful surroundings might be more to him than worth and morals.

Now, as Barbara regarded him the dark pupils of her eyes widened as from a kind of pleasurable wonder. His bearing was princely, his speech and manner suave and engaging. He delicately complimented her upon her appearance, and stood purring delightful nothings until the wait formed, and Lane returned and claimed his fiancée for the first dance. As they floated away together, the young woman looked in Lane's face and half whispered, "Who is he, Phil?" and glanced back at the stranger.

"Tilford Jerf."

"I don't mean that."

"O, I beg pardon. Well, he is recently from New York, antecedent to that a Londoner I believe; the son of a Frenchman and an American actress, if I haven't mixed the genealogy."

"He is rather handsome."

"Rather? He is the handsomest man I ever saw! And clever! Why, the scope of his information is something bewildering to an untraveled westerner, like me. He came to Chicago to try for the chair of physics in the university, he says, but abandoned the notion for something more alluring. He is a wizard in chemistry; at least it strikes me that way. He has been making some special metallurgical tests for both the smelter and steel people, but he is not permanently employed. He has made a discovery, which, I believe, will revolutionize values and change the lot of mankind."

The girl glanced at Lane's face and laughed, thinking him facetious, but there was a strange light of excitement in his eyes. He seemed oddly moved. "Let us go into the conservatory and rest," he said.

When they were seated, the girl turned her starry eyes upon him. "Well, and—" she prompted, smiling.

"He has discovered how to make gold," said Lane, "to produce it as nature produced it. Unreckonable riches are at his command. The world will be changed." He spoke quietly, but his voice was vibrant with feeling. He looked straight before him, his brown eyes aglow with splendid visions.

The girl grasped his arm, a throbbing delight moving her from head to foot. "And you know the secret?" she whispered, eagerly.

"Only the experimental process," he replied. "There are four other steps necessary to complete the commercial process, Jerf says. These he mastered; they are known to no other man."

Barbara settled back, her lifted hand fell upon the other in her lap, the murmurous noise of voices, the rhythmic music and soft shuffle of feet went by her unheeded. A dull kind of fire burned in her eyes.

"Jerf gave me the formula last week," came Lane's voice. "As directed, I procured antimony, sulphur, lead, and iron filings, and mixing them in certain proportions, fused them in a high degree of heat. The resulting mass I took to an assayer. The bit of ore, when reduced in a bone ash upel, yielded gold at the rate of \$4 to the ton. The assayer was astonished, and insisted that I must have put gold in the ore; but I did not; the original materials were chemically pure. It was a kind of miracle, you see. Jerf says that any one may make the laboratory test who cares to, that in order to produce gold in large quantities other chemicals are necessary, together with volcanic heat and a process of antimony distillation. These last are his secrets. By their aid, he can, he avers, produce \$6,000 worth of gold from a ton of crude materials costing \$200. His assays show the result, he says. It is wonderful!"

"Yes, it is wonderful," sighed the girl. For that night Lane's days were crowded with activities. The delicious fever of a great purpose drove him restlessly. He and Jerf incorporated a company and Lane talked the manufacture of gold with an enthusiasm and earnestness that went to Jerf's understandings like wine. Among the credulous he found the name gold a word to conjure with; the immemorial trick of nullifying logic through desire being perhaps never better exemplified. The hard hearted "business man," as a rule, refused to consider Jerf's claims or to kindle with Lane's enthusiasm, being apparently too gold of brain for the blossoming of fancy but there were doctors, lawyers, teachers, and various persons dubbed intelligent, who yielded their savings to the enterprise and themselves to the witchery of dawnlike expectation.

Among the workmen and common people the scheme went like a contagion, many of these mortgaging their homes that they might purchase stock in the company. From finding so many who believed the thing possible, Lane's belief became a solid conviction. He was honest, absolutely, but heart was a poet, a dreamer, an enthusiast. Though of the gold which would accrue to humanity in general, and the numerous poor of his own town who had invested their all in the enterprise, was to him a day and nightly pleasure. And Barbara, lovely Barbara! Surely

fate never held out to a man a more alluring prospect.

In due time a factory was created—a gold factory. Surely the eighth wonder of the world. Many heads, waking and asleep, dreamed of ease and pleasure on account of it. Even the business man, with the cool brain and hard sense, began to question if supreme opportunity had not knocked at his door and had been foolishly dismissed. Bankers confessed to reporters that if the thing were true the monetary world could not escape ultimate revolution.

The company's stock consisted of 20,000 shares of a par value of \$10 each. Jerf was voted half the shares, since the discovery in point of worth transcended all else. Lane was given 500 shares, for thoroughness of the erection of the works and the disposition of the stock he had wrought with an energy and success that seemed scarcely human; in truth, touching public regard, he stood as the chief representative and organizer of the enterprise. Five thousand shares had been sold, mainly to the workmen of South Suburb; 4,500 shares remained in the treasury; with the \$50,000 realized from the sales of stock the factory had been erected. The whole affair had gone forward with a celerity that was amazing.

Previous to the kindling of the fires no one was denied admission to the factory, and many a scoffer was seized with conviction when contemplating the remarkable preparations made for the prosecution of this strangest of all industries. In the front of the building were offices and a chemical laboratory, back of these a huge room, brick paved and lighted from the roof. In this room were seven cupelling furnaces and a huge ovenlike contrivance, of Jerf's invention, called the "creation" furnace. There were ore crushers and mixers and an engine and blowers to create artificial draft.

The smoke and fumes from the furnaces passed through separate flues into an underground brick tunnel, which, outside the rear of the building ended in an iron cistern. In the cistern fans were set to cool the hot vapors and drive them onward through 700 feet of iron flue, which ended in an iron house. In the iron house were hung baglike canvas balloons, into which the vapors issued from the flues, being distilled in the process and forming upon the inside surface of the balloons in crystals, which, Jerf claimed, would show 60 per cent of gold.

These crystals would consist of volatilized antimony turned into gold by the action of cold distillation while passing through the flues. The real wealth, however, lay in the ores produced in the furnaces. At one side of the great room was a small iron barred apartment, in which the goldmaker did his secret compounding.

At length cars of coke, lead, antimony, iron, sulphur, and other substances were delivered at the factory and the fires were kindled. South Suburb, figuratively, held its breath. Jerf, his handsome person capped and clad in the garb of a skilled artisan, divided his time between the compounding room and a general supervision of operations; Lane, pale and thin, but with his big, lustrous eyes aglow, oscillated between his neglected doctor's office and the "gold works."

In the three months just gone he had seen Barbara infrequently, and then, though he was unconscious of it, she had seemed rather enamored of his scheme than himself. Now the day was not far distant when he should make her entirely his own. The flat, wintry sky, the crumbling towers of smoke, and all the clanging channels of the tolling town were tinted, it seemed to him, with auguries of paradise. He had ceased to visit Ann, for "Gruff" Saxon pronounced the making of gold a fraud, both illusory in conception and damnable in sequence. He answered the puzzling fact that Jerf's laboratory process gave off gold by contending that the resulting yield was little more than a trace, and that this much was always native to antimony. Nevertheless the fever raged; it was in the air like the heady fumes of an invisible liquor. Would Jerf make gold? Would the world be changed for Lane and for all men?

One day Jerf went by train to barter for an antimony mine in the far west. He never returned. Another extraordinary thing came to light—Mrs. Hopewell's niece had disappeared. A tourist, returning presently from the south, reported that he had seen Barbara with Jerf in New Orleans. A chill of doubt crept over South Suburb, followed by a fever of rage. Jerf had "sailed" the ore, putting gold into it, and extracting it again and again, so rumor said, and true or false, the report ran like fire in stubble.

One other thing of import, and in this case capable of proof, came into the light of day—the fact that over half the treasury stock had been sold by Jerf, who was president of the company, together with a large amount of spurious stock, the secretary's signature to the certificates of which had been skillfully forged. "Gruff" Saxon smote his mighty right fist into his horny left hand and swore that, properly, some one ought to be hanged. Dozens of workmen agreed with him. At bottom Saxon's heart was soft. That was why he swore. Had the wrong been done himself alone it might have passed, but the outrage on his fellows made him wild.

As for Lane, when the full truth was known, he walked for hours about the "factory" dead of eye, gray of face, stunned. He moved in a dark world, disgraced, beaten, undone. Barbara had, down with the man who had ruined him. His heart's best empanation had met with poison, his confidence had been outraged, his life lay crushed flat. In the twilight of that day he went slowly back to his office, dejected, heavy of foot, cold. People looked at him askance, some laborers whom he met stopped and regarded him ominously; he, the vice president of the Jerf Metallurgical company, the man who had organized and brought the thieving enterprise into operation.

He went up into the front room of his offices and moved about heavily, stood a little by a window, and looked out, duly noting that snow was beginning to fall and the wind to blow. He turned and sat down in a chair by a table, and opening a case, took out a surgeon's knife and held the edge of it. He looked at the bright tongue of steel, then laid it on the table, turned and ran his eyes along a row of phials in another case, noting the bottles labeled poison, then settled back in the chair and sat staring.

Night was falling without, closing swift and black on the town like the shutting of mighty wings in its darkness, swirling snow and driving smoke. He got up at last, ignited the gas, and sat down to a desk and began to write. Presently he unlocked a drawer and took a small roll of bank notes, some papers, and 500 shares of Jerf gold stock, drawn in a single certificate. He laid the valuables on the table by him and went on writing hour after hour, his features set and white, his hand steady.

Down in the streets the cars clanged through the storm, the lights were dim halos, the walks all but deserted. In the saloons were crowds of men, drinking, but hilarious, but mainly wet from the snow, red and huddled. Here and there a gold stock certificate was hurried down on a bar and scornfully pushed back again to the owner. "Not worth the paper it is written on," was the usual verdict.

"Take it to Lane, the smooth tongued liar!" from a bystander.

"Yes, ram it down his throat, the cur!" from a second.

"I wonder how much his 500 shares netted him, damn him!" from another.

"I've told dot he sell 400 of dem shares already for from \$500 to \$800 apiece," from a German, blowing the foam from his lager.

"I'm thinkin' a bit of him would do 'im good," from an Irishman. "I s'pose he helped wid the forgin'." Do any one know if the devil is in town?"

"He was seen dis evening, but I bet you he was gone to meet de odder feller by morning," from the bartender. Thus the comments ran, virulent, inflammatory, profane.

Near midnight a slim figure, buffeted and stumbling through the swirling eddies of storm, came panting down a dark side street, crept along an alley, and hastily climbed the back stair to Lane's offices. On the landing, an uncovered porch jutting from beneath the rear windows, the figure paused, and, pushing back masses of blowing hair from excited eyes, peered in through the snow fringed panes. The young doctor, his work finished, was leaning against the table, the knife

which was to bring him peace in his hand. Opening his vest he felt for his beating heart, then drew back the knife and aimed it. His face was dead white and quiet as a stone.

Apparently he heard nothing, save if might be strange thoughts touching together in his brain and the red tide wandering his veins. As he drew in his breath and poised the knife, a high, piercing cry ran through the rooms. He dropped the knife, threw both hands to his head, and turned round and round like one leaping out of sleep. The noise of flapping signs, the storm raging over the roofs, the grinding rumble of distant trains, seemed to burst upon him with an appalling distinctness. His face flushed, his hands began to tremble. He went out into the dim passage and listened, passed again into the front office, then through the open door into the rear apartment, and unlocked and pulled open an outside door. Ann Saxon, bedraggled and smothered in snow, lay against the door. With a cry of wonder and alarm Lane drew her into the room. She was choking and struggling for breath.

"I—I couldn't get the alarm open! I—I thought—I was too late!" she gasped.

He lifted her to her feet, staring at her in dazed amazement. "Where did you—what is the matter?" he asked in a confused way.

The girl staggered toward him and steadied herself. "I—I ran—all the way. When I came home from playing at Laxon's mother said that father had been home and gone away again; he'd been drinking, and—said you'd have trouble on your hands before—midnight." She labored the words out, one hand on her heart, the other pushing the tangled hair from her wet face. Lane stood speechless. "You must not—stay—here!" she went on; "they are going to kill you! There is a lot of them down in the alley now. You better—"

A jarring rumble of feet came up the snow cushioned back stair, and a sudden tramping and shuffling of heavy boots burst up from the front entrance. Lane leaped through the middle door into the main office and seized the keys, the primal instinct of self-preservation hot in every fiber. Almost instantly men broke into the apartments from the rear and front, heavy tramping, liquor heated, clotted with wet snow. Saxon was well to the front of them, a revolver in one hand, a rope in the other. He was a brawny, deep chested giant, with a strong, red bearded face and blue eyes.

"We've come for ye, Mither Doctor," he said. "Stan' back, boys, and let me get to him!"

He pushed roughly toward the crowding men. Lane stood at bay, the knife drawn back, his lips shut tight, his eyes wide and gleaming. His tongue seemed incapable of articulation. Suddenly Ann emerged from the jostling pack and stood beside him. "Give me the knife," she commanded. "Give me the knife!"

He yielded it into her hand like one in a dream. She turned and faced the crowd, erect, panting. Oaths that were unconscious exclamations came from the lips of some, and from "Gruff" Saxon's rugged neck a queer, rasping note of wonder.

"Ann—why, what does this mean? What are you doing here?" he finally demanded.

"I've come to see that you don't commit murder," replied the girl, her delicate nostrils quivering as she looked him straight in the face.

"He's a lyn' around and ought to be hung! Every man of us says so!"

"Drunk men are not good judges. You ought to be ashamed, all of you."

"O, h—! I get out of the way! Go home, where ye belong!" growled Saxon, advancing.

She turned the knife toward her own heaving breast. "Father, stop! If you advance another foot toward Dr. Lane, if you lift your pistol, I will bury this blade in my heart!" Her eyes flamed out from her tangled hair like an angry panther's.

The men jostled about open mouthed, Saxon looked at the girl a moment, perplexed, baffled. "Well, you're a splinter offen the old block," he said, and laughed gruffly. "I guess y'r made o' the right stuff. Boys, I take it we're drunk. Let's get out o' here."

Smitten with sudden shame, the men trooped down the stairway, grinning, self-conscious. Saxon looked back at the young pair a moment, hesitatingly. "Come along with me, daughter; I'm goin' home to y'r mother," he said. "I didn't quite understand—I didn't know it was this way. Come."

The girl did not look at Lane, but rushed into her father's arms and clung to him. As they stumbled down the stair, Lane heard her sobbing. Then he broke out of his nightmare stupor. The flapping of signs, the storm roaring across the roofs, the jarring rumble of passing trains, all the noises of the night, awoke again in his consciousness. He looked about the room oddly, at the knife on the table, then suddenly sank down upon a chair and burst into tears.

When dawn came again Lane had left South Suburb. "Gruff" Saxon received an envelope through the mails at noon. Opening it he found Lane's 500 share certificate. A note signed by Lane was pinned to it. "You will see by the inclosed that I intended no wrong," the note read. "I was deceived. I have gone to find Jerf. If it lies in my power he shall return to this people and answer them in the courts. As for your daughter, I would thank her, but—I can find no words."

That evening when Saxon arrived at home he found Ann ill in bed. He went up to her room and laid the letter in her hand, then stooped down and kissed her, and went out. More than a year went by and Jerf's "factory" lay cold. In the general public memory it was much as if it had not been, but to the stockholders, and some who were struggling to pay mortgages incurred in its interest, the fraud stuck warm and bitter.

One day at the warm end of June Lane entered "Gruff" Saxon's gate and stood at the door of the cottage. He looked thin, tanned, and worn. Ann, untying an apron from her waist, came and opened the screen door. An exclamation of wonder and welcome broke from her lips. She led the returned traveler into the little parlor and they sat down. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks flushed. Her mother had gone to Peasam's Colossal department store to a bargain sale, she said. She herself had stopped to practice a little before finishing her dusting. Her violin lay on the center table. They both looked at it.

He was glad to see that she was keeping up her music, he said. He had arrived in the morning and had gone up and tried to straighten out his affairs, but had not finished yet. He would have to hire some one to scrub out the rooms. Thus they talked of common things, half embarrassed, loath to uncover the forbidding matter which lay between them.

But they came to it at last. "I wished to tell you first," he said, "for I owe you everything. I found Jerf. It was a long, strange search, with an ending I wish I might forget. I first went to New Orleans; from there I traced them—Barbara was with him—through a zigzagging course to one of the Bahamas. Of course, detectives were hunting for Jerf, but mainly in the United States. I confess that I followed them with murder in my heart, with a determination to compel Jerf to return or kill him. Now, I feel humble and ashamed. Nature showed to me that she can execute, that vengeance is not properly man's."

"The story is not a short one, but I will make it so. I found Jerf living in a palatial house, built in an obscure quarter not far from the sea. I have never seen elsewhere so perfect and beautiful a dwelling. It was not large, as great buildings go, but stood a distinct creation of poetic architecture, half hidden in a wonderful park of blossoming greenery. Under an assumed name he had purchased the place from an eccentric but wealthy Englishman."

"The islands, you know, are like floating gardens. All is warm, charming, sensuous, narcotic. The sea, no longer a flinty green as in the north, is opaline, translucent, soft; the dawns open like the breaking of pearls, the day passes like a phase of waking slumber, and the evenings fall drowsily and full of smoky gold. It seemed a flowery corner of heaven into which they had gone, you see, but the price paid was falsehood, perfidy, and deceit, and a curse, like a serpent, followed them into their bower." Gradually Lane had come to speak with fervor and an unconscious eloquence that seemed a reflection of his long pent up feelings.

"Well, Jerf had been living so for perhaps six months," he went on. "When I found out surely where he was I went at once to his blossomed garden, determined that he should make reparation or feel the knife that you and I came near turning against our own hearts. I found that which will remain in my memory until death. Jerf was sick and alone in the midst of his splendors. His servants had fled; Barbara had taken a portion of his ill gotten money and gone he knew not where. She had flown filled with abhorrence and dismay, her paradise in ruin, for Jerf—how can I tell it? Jerf had turned back!"

Ann looked at him with eyes in which horror and perplexing wonder mingled. Lane drew the back of his hand across his moist brow. "It seemed the wrath of God," he said, reverently. "Perhaps it was; yet, it was a disease—Addison's disease—a phenomenon of rare occurrence and mysterious origin. What it must have seemed to Jerf, beautiful, princely, surrounded with luxury and lovely things, to see himself thus turn black and hideous, may, perhaps, be imagined, but there are no words for it. In sheer horror of himself, he took his own life. That occurred the next day after I found him."

Lane paused for a moment, overcome with the awful memory. "Still, he made such restitution as he could. Filled with remorse and feeling himself accused, he left papers conveying to the stockholders of the Metallurgical company such wealth as remained in his hands. But, more important than this, he left a paper which states that in operating the plant, which had been erected solely for appearance, he discovered that the great heat employed and the process of fusing and roasting the conglomerate of minerals produced tungsten and platinum. In small quantities, and a high grade of refined antimony. These are valuable, and, following the directions which he left, I hope the enterprise may be made to pay a profit on the par value of the original stock. At least I shall devote my life to repairing any loss sustained by the workmen and the poor through following my advice. That task is sacred."

They looked at each other. "Do you—do you know where Barbara is?" asked Ann.

"She has returned, I understand; not to Mrs. Hopewell's, but to her home," said Lane, and was silent. The girl looked down and he saw that her cheeks were wet with tears.

"I must go now," said Lane. "I have many things to do. Tomorrow, if you will let me, I will come again. I have left many things, and, to me, at least, the most important one, unsaid. May I come?"

She put her hand in his and lifted her eyes to his face. "You are always welcome," she said, and he saw that light upon her features which is not of the land or sea, but of love's morning in the heart. Out of his crumbled expectations, from the wreck of his splendid dreams of gold, had come to him at least one golden thing—little Ann.